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Court's future worries S. Jerseyans

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By BRENDAN LOWE
For the Courier Post

As news spread Friday of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's retirement, South Jersey politicians and residents said they appreciated what she had done and feared what lay ahead.

"I was disappointed and upset that she's leaving," said Democrat Tracey Thomasey, 29, a Collingswood resident. "I think she made decisions that were good for women, good for people of lower socioeconomic status. I thought she was temperate."

In Washington, U.S. Rep. Jim Saxton, R-Mount Holly, said in a statement that the first female justice had been a powerful pioneer.

"Justice O'Connor has broken barriers and opened doors for women in our judicial system," he said. "As a swing judge on the nation's high court, she has made her mark as one of the more influential justices currently sitting on the bench."

The 75-year-old O'Connor often served as the tipping point in 5-4 decisions, as she did in upholding affirmative action on college campuses in 2003. Sen. Jon Corzine, D-Hoboken, lauded O'Connor's 24-year stint in the Supreme Court.

"Her respect for decisions guaranteeing a woman's right to choose and affirmative action serve as examples of her role as a centrist coalition builder," he said in a statement. "In her moderation and restraint, she strengthened the judiciary and fought for judicial independence."

O'Connor's resignation opens a seat on the bench that President Bush said he will fill before the high court reconvenes in October. Along Haddon Avenue in Collingswood Friday, residents shared apprehension about the vacancy.

"It's bad news, because odds are we are going to get a Christian conservative," said Democrat Mike Scotko, 51, an atheist who calls Republicans 'Christ-focrats.' "I think we need a liberal judge to stop the religious right."

Scotko was unafraid of a battle in the Senate over whomever Bush names as his nominee. In May, the Senate nearly shut down because of disagreement about Bush's U.S. Court of Appeals nominees. A bipartisan group of 14 senators reached a compromise, with Democrats promising not to use their ability to filibuster except in "extraordinary circumstances."

Democratic Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-Cliffside Park, cautioned Bush about putting forth a nominee who would test that vague term.

"The American people want fair, moderate judges protecting our rights, and I strongly urge President Bush to send us a nominee who reflects mainstream legal views, not partisan extremes," Lautenberg said in a statement.

Rutgers-Camden School of Law professor Earl Maltz said he saw doom on the horizon.

"There probably is going to be a nuclear war in Congress," he said.

As for beliefs the ideal nominee would hold dear, Collingswood residents sounded off on many of the hot-button issues, such as abortion and gay rights.

Independent Ralph Palmieri, 62, said he wanted O'Connor to be replaced with another woman.

Shiryl White, 34, a Democrat, said she hopes the new court does not get rid of affirmative action.

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"I was pretty disappointed when they were trying to do away with it," said White, referring to the 2003 case that went before the court. "We need affirmative action."

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